DAWN

OPINION

Shrinking freedoms

IT comes as no surprise but is nevertheless cause for embarrassment. Pakistan has been placed close to the bottom in Freedom House's Freedom on the Net index, scoring only 27 out of 100. Ranked 'not free', the country accompanies China, Iran and Russia on the list known for internet curbs. Regional peers, meanwhile, performed better with India at 51, Sri Lanka at 53 and Bangladesh at 45. All three were declared 'partly free'. The assessment comes at a time when Pakistan is experiencing major democratic curtailments such as the passage of the 27th Amendment, besides repeated internet shutdowns, including the recent weeklong outage in Balochistan.

According to the report, which gave Pakistan a score of 6/25 on 'access', 13/35 on 'limits on content', and 8/40 on 'violations of user rights', the country has seen a rapid decline over the past 15 years. In this period, like in other countries experiencing similar downward trends, the government imposed curbs on online activity in response to challenges to its rule. The country was ranked 'not free' in 2012 and not much seems to have changed since. Between June 2024 and May this year, repeated disruptions were reported across major communication platforms, including WhatsApp and Signal, often linked to new blocking and monitoring technologies. In November 2024, authorities restricted internet services across Islamabad during mass protests. The pattern intensified this year with threats to block VPNs, mandatory registration requirements that sought user identification details, and amendments to Peca introduced in January. Rights groups warn that these changes contain vague language that can easily be used to suppress speech that is critical of the state. Such repressive actions have consequences. The report documents at least five death sentences issued for alleged online blasphemy during the coverage period. It also highlights the continuing influence of the establishment over electoral processes, media environments and policy decisions. These pressures create an atmosphere in which online and offline expression feel unsafe.

Heavy-handed restrictions reinforce the perception that the state prefers control and opacity over engagement and accountability. The passage of the 27th Amendment, criticised for weakening constitutional safeguards, adds to the sense that Pakistan's democratic space is contracting. Elections alone cannot uphold democracy. They require an open public sphere in which citizens can speak, assemble and challenge authority. When the physical and digital spheres contract simultaneously, the foundations of democratic life weaken. In a modern democracy, the internet must serve as a basic civic infrastructure rather than a tool of control. Transparent regulation, judicial oversight of shutdowns and the repeal of opaque cyber law provisions are non-negotiable. Pakistan can still walk back and reverse this negative trajectory. It remains to be seen whether the political will to do so exists.

AJK power games

IT appears that Chaudhry Anwarul Haq's tenure as prime minister of Azad Kashmir is about to come to a close, as a no-trust resolution against him has been submitted, and in keeping with the region's constitution, Faisal Rathore has been proposed as the new leader of the house. Efforts to dislodge Mr Haq had been ongoing for weeks, and a 'breakthrough' was achieved after the PPP announced Mr Rathore's name on Friday. Mr Haq, initially a PTI member, had been elected PM in April 2023 after his predecessor was disqualified and he received the support of a 'forward bloc' from within his old party, as well as the then opposition in the AJK parliament. However, deadly protests last month, led by the Jammu Kashmir Joint Action Committee, appeared to spell the beginning of the end for the Haq ministry. The protesters had demanded, among other things, a halt to 'elite privileges' for the region's ministers and officials. Matters turned so serious that Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had to dispatch a high-powered team from Islamabad to quell the unrest. There were also complaints that Mr Haq had called very few sessions of the AJK Legislative Assembly, while crucially, it was being said that he had lost the confidence of powerful quarters within the Pakistani state.

Mr Rathore, who comes from a political family, is said to have a 'conciliatory' nature. He will need to exercise all his political prowess to address the issues of the region. The unfortunate fact is that power in AJK has become a game of musical chairs, with the various political tribes taking turns at the helm of the region's administration, only to be ousted by their opponents when public frustration boils over, or when powerful players in Islamabad and Rawalpindi decide there needs to be a change in Muzaffarabad. This political paralysis results in public discontent, as last month's protests showed. People of the region want genuine good governance and their basic issues to be resolved. When democratic institutions fail to address their demands, and when political actors are too busy fighting amongst themselves, the people hit the streets to air their grievances. This debilitating cycle must be broken, and the genuine issues of AJK's citizens be addressed immediately. The incoming administration must prioritise service delivery and responsive governance over politicking.

Reboot tolerance

DIVERSITY is central to the human spirit. The International Day for Tolerance, which is being observed today, is a reminder that acceptance and appreciation bind us, and that the divergence of opinions, cultures, behaviour, heritage and beliefs close the loopholes in our social fabric. Ancient societies were rife with intolerance. Sadly, despite education and scientific advancements, we are witnessing a global regression towards earlier patterns due to misplaced superiority. Power, in all its manifestations, seeks to control the vulnerable. In Pakistan's turbulent societal setting, governments weaponise fear, which creates insularity and animosity. We need a greater sense of security for more harmony among our people. Some have different faiths, others different politics, ethnicity, aspirations and practices. All these should translate into collective growth.

The path to prosperity lies in valuing differences. A firm stand against intolerance of any kind hinges on how committed the state, citizens and the clergy are to tackle the factors that drive hate and parochialism in the country. Respect for fundamental rights must be safeguarded to curb patriarchy, xenophobia and online hate. Educational institutions play a pivotal role in inculcating independent views, critical thinking and ethical inference in the young. Teachers cannot transform attitudes without a comprehensive overhaul of textbooks so that our history, heritage and ideals are reframed away from exploitative narratives. Moreover, access to information coupled with open-minded and balanced religious coaching, as well as implementation of laws against crimes of discrimination promise peace and productivity. The government must endorse justice for vulnerable and economically weaker groups. We have watched intolerance cause havoc across the globe. Prejudice and racism have not spared Pakistan's image either. Only tolerance, free thought and democracy sustain diverse cultures. Lastly, we must embrace respect. Societies thrive as a confluence not a cauldron.

BY MUHAMMAD AMIR RANA

Terrorism's strategic space

When state priorities shift, terrorists exploit the resulting vacuums and disruptions.

THE regional geopolitical landscape remains highly tense, with Afghanistan, India and Pakistan positioned on a delicate escalation ladder. What is contributing significantly to this tension is the role of non-state actors. Where Afghanistan and Pakistan are concerned, the TTP is now a major point of contention. Meanwhile, for India and Pakistan, the situation has been exacerbated by the recent terrorist attack in Delhi. The identities and motives of the perpetrators are not clear, neither are possible links with regional or international terrorist networks. Nevertheless, it is evident that terrorist actors are a key factor in conflict escalation in the region. The irony is that political leaders are viewing the problem primarily through geopolitical and ideological lenses, an approach that will only benefit the terrorists.

States and their security institutions, particularly in South Asia, have long been accustomed to interpreting terrorism-related threats within broad geopolitical frameworks. While this may provide some diplomatic or political leverage, it rarely contributes to actually resolving the underlying issues. This is precisely what terrorist actors want. They exploit such environments, expanding their operational space with minimal investment in attacks that can inflict disproportionate damage on both inter-state relations and lives.

One of the core domains in which terrorism operates lies between the broader geopolitical environment and the counterterrorism practices of states. Terrorist organisations shape their strategies, operations, narratives, and political messaging within this space. When state priorities shift, terrorists exploit the resulting vacuums and disruptions. A case in point is the US shift in focus from Afghanistan to Iraq in 2003, which expanded the theatre of war for terrorist groups. This allowed them to build extensive networks. Their internal differences, rooted in divergent readings of global and regional politics, initially weakened them, but these same differences eventually gave birth to the militant Islamic State (IS) group and several other groups across Iraq and Syria.

Terrorist groups also drew ideological strength from the nature of the US, Nato, and allied counterterrorism approaches, which were often brutal and violated humanitarian norms. From abuses at Abu Ghraib to torture cells, and later the collateral damage caused by drone strikes in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Africa, and the Gulf, these actions fuelled resentment. Terrorist groups effectively exploited this anger to amplify their narratives, enhance their recruitment, and sustain their financial networks.

It is not surprising that when then president Barack Obama announced America's exit from Iraq in October 2011, most terrorist groups redirected their focus towards the Assad regime in Syria. Although Russia, Israel, Iran, Turkey and the Arab states pursued their own geopolitical agendas, they eventually recalibrated their political positions within the increasingly complex geopolitical landscape. Over time, they adopted more pragmatic approaches. As the conflict evolved, the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham-led alliance captured key areas around Damascus and gradually emerged as a significant actor in both regional and global politics. Recently, President Donald Trump received Ahmed al-Sharaa, who headed HTS, and praised him in his typical style, declaring that under his leadership, Syria would become a vibrant state.

The Afghan Taliban, meanwhile, gained considerable strength from the expanding conflict and from the support they received within the neighbourhood, particularly from Pakistan, which enhanced both their operational capacity and political leverage. Afghanistan, however, represented a very different theatre of war. Its geopolitics were not as multi-layered or complex as those in Iraq and Syria. The principal clash of interests centred on Pakistan and India, and this rivalry shaped much of the Nato presence in Afghanistan.

Iran, for its part, was occupied with multiple regional priorities. Its main focus was the Middle East, where it sought to secure its proxies and allies in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. Consequently, Iran invested more in recruiting fighters from these regions, while providing support to certain Taliban factions at a level that never matched Pakistan's influence.

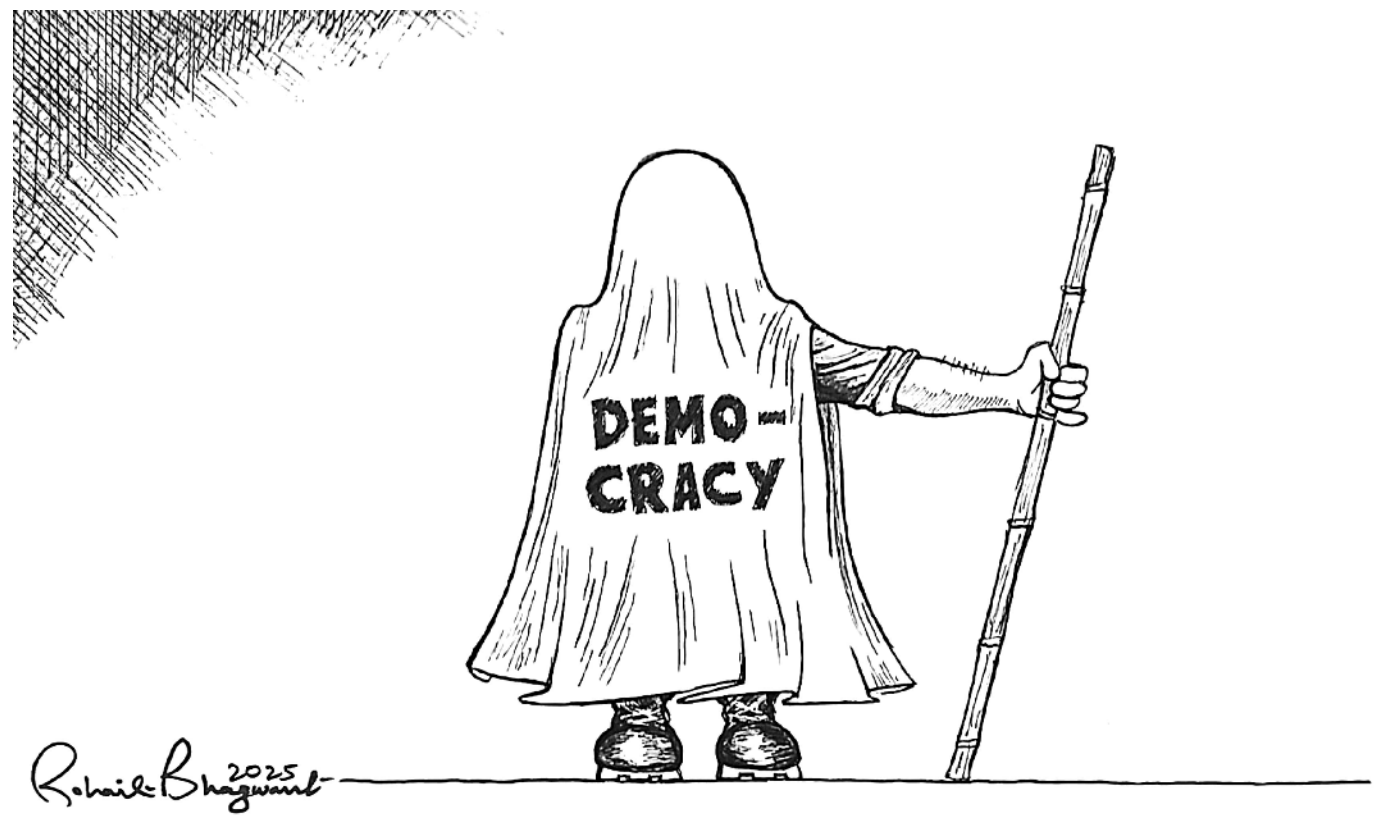
For the Taliban, the equations were not particularly difficult. They found political and strategic space between US and Nato urgency to exit the region and Pakistan's desire to safeguard its interests in Afghanistan. What later unfolded between Pakistan and the Taliban is a separate story, one that has become increasingly evident in recent developments. Afghanistan's conservative, tribal-centric nationalist tendencies also enabled the Taliban to shape their political approach, negotiate with the US and later manoeuvre strategically in their dealings with Pakistan.

However, the major commonality between HTS and the Taliban was that both were claimants to territory and to a form of power that their respective religious or ethnic groups believed they had lost. Al Qaeda, by contrast, belonged to a different category, anchored in ideological operations rather than territorial ambition. It sharpened the political worldview of terrorist organisations across the globe, and to some extent, IS later followed its template. Al Qaeda remained an inspiration and a connective force for smaller terrorist groups, self-radicalised individuals and segments of Muslim diaspora communities, as well as Muslim societies.

Al Qaeda also shaped the worldview of Pakistani and Kashmir-based groups. Its call for 'global jihad' encouraged militants to detach themselves from state agendas and pursue a 'pure' cause, fighting for lands free from the influence of Muslim states, which they perceived as subservient to a global imperial order. An example is Zakir Musa in Indian-held Kashmir, who attempted to 'purify' the Kashmiri jihad movement. He openly criticised groups such as Lashkar-e-Taiba (LeT) and claimed that jihad should be waged solely for God.

In many instances, terrorist groups deliberately create conditions that push states to the brink of confrontation, as Al Qaeda (through LeT) attempted with the Mumbai attacks in 2008. They closely study political contexts and exploit any emerging fissures within states. In India's context, the probability cannot be ruled out that a rogue or self-radicalised cell of indoctrinated individuals can independently conceive and execute acts of violence driven by utopian or grandiose ideas rooted in faith, ethnicity, freedom, perceived suppression, or reactions to repression. ■

The writer is a security analyst.



BY ABBAS NASIR

Impact of 27th on jailed leader

FEAR was the main reason behind the passage of the 26th Amendment. Fear that the Supreme Court would somehow free jailed former prime minister Imran Khan and even go as far as to annul the last election in which, many believed, the will of the people at the ballot box may not have reflected in the final result. The 27th Amendment takes that thought to its logical conclusion.

The move gives constitutional cover to what the defence minister has called a 'hybrid' system and also acknowledges and institutionalises the senior partner's lead role which will extend beyond the term in office of the junior, civilian partner.

When critics say the superior courts will now be under the executive's influence, even control, they mean that given the balance of powers between the civilian and the uniformed, parts of the courts will now find themselves in the vice-like grip of the establishment.

While that may be true, it is not out of place to say that what has happened has given constitutional cover to a fait accompli; except for very brief and insignificant periods of independence, the superior judiciary has rarely stood its ground in the face of establishment pressure.

Starting with the Supreme Court's predecessor the Federal Court, chief justice Munir's infamous verdict, which overturned the Sindh Chief Court's ruling in favour of Moulvi Tamizuddin, the Speaker, who had challenged the dissolution of the assembly by Governor-General Ghulam Mohammed, to the present day, the superior judiciary's crucial verdicts have reflected more the will of the power centre(s) than the rule of law, or the spirit and supremacy of the Constitution.

I can rattle off events in the Ayub era to the upholding of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's ouster to his death sentence and his execution to the dismissal of many governments starting in 1988 and continuing till the military takeover in 1999. When has the Supreme Court stood its ground and stood with law, justice and the people? If the Supreme Court was actually 'hollowed out', it happened way before the 27th Amendment became part of the Constitution.

It sent two elected prime ministers home more recently and followed the establishment's lead. What has happened now is seen as outrageous simply because it formalises what many justices appear to have long been comfortable with. Honourable exceptions being exceptions and nothing more. For every justice who refused to bow to the will of the gun and decided to step aside, there were, arguably, dozens who were more than willing to fill the breach.

That's the tragedy. As for the international environment today, democracy, the rule of law, human rights and individual liberty all seem to be under siege or attack. These cherished values seem to be in retreat.

> So far, a lot of the blame has been put on the political class for its failure to deliver.

In the day and age of social media-shaped narratives and decline in the influence of legacy media, especially those elements of the legacy or traditional media that believed in truth, objectivity, balance and fairness, a whole new equilibrium is emerging. Where it takes us or is taking us is another story.

In our case specifically, with so many external dangers and the resurgence of terrorism, and having discarded a relatively better form of democracy in favour of the hybrid variety, all authority and power now vests in one individual. Or, some would argue, the individual has been facilitated by politicians lacking in legitimacy to take total control. From now on, the onus of delivery is on him and accolades or the opposite will be his alone. I, for one, earnestly hope that in the area of national defence, he can repeat the wins of the May conflict with India and improve the performance of the SIFC, which has not managed to achieve what it was intended to.

Going forward, the only thing that guarantees national security and stability in a hostile environment is economic development and provision of jobs and basic services to the people, a vast majority of whom have nothing. Literally. Our people have been badly let down.

So far, a lot of the blame has been put on the political class for its failure to deliver. Even if there are glaring examples of the political class having been blocked or removed from decision-making when the economy was doing well. Individual ambitions of unelected power wielders overwhelmed what was in the interest of the teeming multitudes.

By its very definition, this hybrid set-up devolves common responsibility where the senior partner cannot blame civilian junior partners for failures. Any shortcomings will have to be jointly shouldered.

This 27th Amendment seems to make the task of the politicians and political parties out of power even harder to stage a comeback. Having tried to take to the streets to force a change in the status quo and failing, perhaps the one hope that flickered in what was a strong wind was legal, judicial relief coming via the superior courts. That too has been extinguished.

Sympathisers and supporters in other powerful institutions have been purged or sidelined. This calls for a change in the opposition strategy as no assistance will be forthcoming from within power centres in the country.

Imran Khan's supporters and believers say his position is unshakeable, principled, while others at the very least feel he has so far displayed resilience and stubbornness in not talking to the junior hybrid partner as he has often been told to.

With the legal route to freedom, rehabilitation now blocked off, it will be interesting to see what the former prime minister and his key lieutenants agree is the best way forward. Given that his deputies constantly complain of his being largely incommunicado, it may be weeks, even months before the first hints emerge of a shift, if any, in strategy. ■

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